

**Tool 2(cycle).6. How Three Schools Designed Collaborative Teams (p. 1 of 2)****How Three Schools Designed Collaborative Teams**

As we have seen from the research on training, teacher opportunities to collaborate with peers when learning new curriculums, instructional strategies, and assessment systems are crucial to the actual implementation of planned change. Fortunately, there is no one right way to set up structures for collaboration, but it is critical that they be formally organized rather than left to chance. Most schools are not naturally structured to support teacher collaboration around planned change, and thus formal arrangements need to be put in place.

The following three examples illustrate some of the varieties of collaborative arrangements observed in schools. Review them and discuss structures that would work in your setting to engage all teachers in collaborative work during the implementation process.

**Lake Elementary**

Lake Elementary School had a faculty of 29, including two special education teachers and three “specials,” (e.g., art, music, P.E. teachers). The “special” teachers were not at the school daily, but on four days of the week, at least two of them were present in the school. Because the school was a Title I school, there were ten instructional assistants working full or part time in the school as well. The principal, working with her staff, designed the following arrangement for collaborative teams.

Each grade level team met for an hour weekly to share and plan lessons, develop and share materials. This pattern was followed three of four weeks every month. On the fourth week of the month, an early release day provided two and one-half hours for the faculty, one hour of which was spent as a “study team of the whole” to examine and report student data, with the remaining time spent by grade level teams to work on their own data (student data and implementation data.) Implementation data were given to the principal at the conclusion of these meetings each month.

The principal of Lake Elementary used the large group meetings to encourage teams, celebrate progress and successes, and sometimes, to share demonstrations of particularly successful lessons. She often taped lessons as she moved about the school during the month, and teachers gained recognition and status in the sharing of these bits of taped lessons.

**Southern Middle School**

Southern Middle School had adopted a middle school structure two years before embarking on a school-wide reading across the curriculum initiative. Teachers already had 90 minutes every other day for integrated team meetings. The principal suggested that one of these periods be used for collaborative planning for the school-wide change initiative.

In the beginning, teachers had mixed feelings about this arrangement. While they already knew their team members well, and liked the idea of not disrupting the existing (new) schedule, they felt the need to meet with same-group subject areas for the planning of lessons.

For four months teachers met with their existing integrated teams. Their assessment at the end of that period was that their lessons were of much higher quality because of the need to basically “teach” their lessons to different subject colleagues. On the other hand, they felt working at least some of the time with same-subject peers would lessen their workloads. In the second semester of the school year, teachers met twice a month with their integrated team members and during a two-week period, had one 90 minute work session with same subject peers. Time for this third

**Tool 2(cycle).6. How Three Schools Designed Collaborative Teams (p. 2 of 2)**

meeting was generated by the principal and a roving substitute who spent two days a month in the building, releasing one teacher every period. The combination of a substitute, the principal and a naturally occurring prep period created teams of three for their same subject work.

Half the time in monthly staff meetings was devoted to either the sharing of school-wide student data or live demonstrations by teachers the principal had asked to teach the group.

### **City High School**

City High School had a traditional schedule. Every teacher had a prep period sometime during the day, and department and staff meetings were held monthly. The principal asked a representative group of teachers (department chairs) to devise a plan that would enable all teachers to work with colleagues on a weekly basis to implement the cooperative strategies the entire staff was learning. After conferring with their respective departments, the chairs devised a plan that was flexible in the extreme (and which reflected their principal's willingness to work out flexible arrangements). Teams of three to five teachers met in the following patterns: some met during shared planning periods once a week; some met before or after school one day a week, and chose another day to leave early (so as not to exceed the limits of contracted time); one group met every other Saturday morning for two to three hours (this was volunteer activity and met the needs of group members to have spouses assume baby-sitting roles).

### **Variety**

Over the past 25 years, [researchers] have seen a nearly endless variety of arrangements in schools for teacher collaborative work. The successful work of these groups seems much more dependent on the shared commitment to practice newly learned skills, share the work of planning and development, learn from one another, and cooperate toward shared goals for student growth rather than on any single structure for collaborative work.

One distinguishing characteristic of "successful" collaborative teams is their *productivity*. They use this shared time to accomplish work, the sessions are planned and businesslike rather than social, and their cohesion stems from shared professional growth and accomplishment.